

Graham Harvey, ed., *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 544 pp., \$44.95 (paper), \$140 (cloth).

The term “animism” has been used in the social sciences and religious studies as a wide-ranging label to describe characteristics of human thought and feeling, and it has been applied to aspects of culture as well as cognitive mechanisms. Originating in the writing of nineteenth-century English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, who defined it in *Primitive Culture* (1871) as a foundational religious belief in spirits or souls animating and existing in things, the term has undergone many incarnations. From an understanding of native people’s strange beliefs it now manifests in a more acceptable form as a participatory and inspirited worldview. In this latter vein, Graham Harvey has brought together a variety of voices and approaches that invites interpreters and theorists to engage in a more respectful approach to animism as representing previously marginalized cultural knowledges. Following on from his other related edited collections *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (2000), *Readings in Indigenous Religion* (2002), and *Shamanism: A Reader* (2002), a central theme in the present edited volume is the important issue of whether humans share consciousness, “soul,” or “spirit” with other species. Harvey’s own position as editor of the large collection of chapters is that an interspecies communication is the “new animism.” Animism is the “in between” relating persons of different species rather than what has been the more conventional anthropological approach of the human “possession” by spirits.

New animism is always local and specific, and according to Harvey, it might not be romantic, transcendent, or esoteric, but rather practical and pragmatic. Animism is either a part of a religious experience/practice, or it is a re-imagining and re-direction in larger than human multi-species communication religious experience in this-worldly activity. The stated aims of the book are to advance a discussion of ideas and new practices; to show that “animism” refers to more than one thing or theory; to provide a meeting point of shared interest/difference; to examine specific relationships to nature of human beings and the nature of world; and to blend description and theorizing. The book certainly succeeds in setting diverse

phenomena and approaches alongside each other, and one could argue that it does invite a more considerate move toward understanding indigenous cultures and alternative ways of being, as well as challenge our assumptions, but whether it advances discussion is another matter.

The book is structured in seven parts. Each section has a short introduction of the chapters contained within. There are too many chapters to comment in detail on each, and as it would be unfair to make individual selection I will give a flavor of the whole volume. The first section, "Different Animisms," opens up the debate on animism. The unfolding chapters raise issues and arguments about those who might be identified as "animists." They invite the reader to reconsider contemporary and historical indigenous life as a foundation for the study of animism. The chapters range from the challenge of understanding the destruction of traditional animistic cultures, and anthropological fieldwork and theory, to a consideration of Tylor's classical account of animism.

The next section, "Dwelling in Nature/Culture," contests the dominant Western ideology of a nature/culture dichotomy as a way of asking the reader to "think again" about a more relational epistemology. This is a classic anthropological topic. All chapters draw on ethnographic research to challenge Western rationalizing discourses that create separation between different areas of lived experience. In "Dwelling in Larger-Than-Human Communities," the chapters explore relations between human and "other-than-human persons," particularly concerning hunting and the taking of animal souls in indigenous cultures, and also issues of morality and community.

"Dwelling With(out) Things," offers chapters that debate the animation, agency or relational liveliness of "things." It proposes a "new fetishism" as a part of a new personalized animism covering "what people do in the company of things" and engages with ethical issues surrounding relationships with an intercommunicative world.

Section five, "Dealing with Spirits," is concerned with the troubled notion of "spirits" in Western academic discourse. A wide range of approaches and interpretations are covered from metaphysics, shamanism, Amazonian ideas about souls, prehistoric rock art, "spirit possession," psychedelically informed eco-activist Paganism, to cognitive theory.

"Consciousness and Ways of Knowing," is the penultimate section that attempts to grapple further with large ontological and epistemological questions. Once again there are a wide variety of

approaches on offer—from a discussion of discontinuity and continuity of consciousness theories, the conduction of science with an inclusive animistic perspective, botanist plant-human relationships, cognitive ethology of non-human animal minds, Eco-Pagan research on embodied knowledge, animist relationality in conducting research, and a social scientific exploration of altered consciousness in relation to spiritual practices.

Finally, “Animism in Performance” explores various ways in which aspects of animism are engaged with in the process of disrupting reductionist assumptions. From environmentalist philosophy, indigenous novels, discussions of enchantment and disenchantment in modern literature, Japanese animists in a consumer society, animistic dancing, and participation in ritual gestures.

The overall strength of the volume is that it brings together many voices on the subject of animism. However, as I have indicated earlier, it might not easily invite discussion, and this can be a weakness in that the reader cannot necessarily see the wood for the trees. According to Harvey, all the animisms introduced constellate around the questions “What is the world like? What makes us human? How do bodies and matter itself relate to consciousness?” These issues are never really brought together in a sustained manner, one that enables a move toward coming to some focused understandings of animism as a constellation of forms of alternative knowing, modes of being that have largely become lost to Western cultures. More editorial guiding through the material, with these questions in mind and explanations, particularly for those new to the debates, would have helped. Harvey states in the Introduction that he does not want to “merely describe” the current state of animism, or to “bring it to a conclusion,” but for this reader at least, some more explanatory structure would assist navigation and help focus this hugely diverse work as a basis for further discussion.

As an anthropologist researching magic, one obvious question for discussion that came to my mind was the relationship between animism and magic. The term “magic,” like the term animism, has wide currency in social scientific research, particularly anthropological debate surrounding notions of rationality and rise of the scientific method, but here there is little mention of the explicit association. This is surprising, as well as disappointing, as the process of magical thinking could be defined as “animism in action.” Rather than just being characterized as esoteric, instrumental, and disassociated from the everyday world, magic as a term can be explained

as a practical participatory process of being. The two concepts of animism and magic together encapsulate a way of understanding a relational and holistic mode of cognition; as well as the plethora of different cultural and social frameworks within which humans engage with, and understand, a world where non-human beings have agency, vitality and spirit. Magical thinking can be defined as an associative aspect of mind completely in tune with animistic modes of thought. Characterized by its diffuse and holistic orientation and sense of permeability of boundaries between material and non-material perceptions of reality, magical thought leads to a certain "knowing with others." This orientation can be described as an analogical mode of thought—rather than the logical mode of abstract scientific thought—and is therefore open to relationships with inspirited and non-human others. In short, magic is intimately related to animism and both concepts need to be seen as related.

Despite this shortfall on recognizing the close association of the concepts of animism and magic, this volume definitely challenges the reader to question how we see the world—it does shake comfortable assumptions and provokes reflection of our place in a wider than human community. In that sense, it works as a collection of interesting, thoughtful perspectives on animism that encourage a more sensory awareness of, and respect for, the living world, as well as its indigenous cultures and knowledges. And to this end, it must be a very useful addition to many bookshelves.

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